Ethics in Contemporary Healthcare

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Prof. James Giordano, PhD

Office: GUMC, Bldg D, Rm 238.
Contact: 202 687-1160
james.giordano@georgetown.edu

Office hours: By appointment

Narrative Description of Course

Contemporary healthcare engages science and technology in a variety of diagnostic and therapeutic approaches in various disciplines (e.g. surgery, pathology, rehabilitation, public health, neurology, etc.) to decrease the incidence of acute disease, lessen the prevalence and impact of chronic conditions, extend the lifespan, and in many ways, offer great promise to expand the potential for human performance. Yet, despite these apparent benefits, the technocentric turn in healthcare and medicine has also spawned a number of ethical issues, including debates about autonomy of patients and clinicians, the nature of informed consent, conflicts between motives and duties of beneficence, non-maleficence and socio-political and economic forces, just allocation of medical resources, services and goods, and, more fundamentally, the nature of the “good” in medicine, given the increasing multi-cultural and ethico-legally pluralist environment in which healthcare is afforded. Moreover, we must ask not only those ways in which cutting-edge developments in science and technology can be used to affect human health, and the boundaries of normality, abnormality, wellness and disease, but how should these approaches be employed in this diverse social stage. As well, it is important to address the relative merits, and limitations of various ethical approaches, and to examine the ideal and actual relationship of ethics, policy and laws that guide and govern biomedical research and its translation in practice, when articulating healthcare as a viable public good.

This course begins with an examination of the historicity of medicine (as a healing profession) and ethics, as illustrative of the socio-cultural forces (from antiquity to the present) that shaped the contemporary scientific, technical and economic environment in which healthcare is articulated. Particular attention will be paid to the 20th century, given the rise of the scientific and technological estate that shaped society and the conduct of medicine – inclusive of the improbities that paved the way for the formalization of medical ethics. This historicity will be presented as a backdrop to illustrate the value of a core philosophy of healthcare, healing and medicine, which serves to ground any constructs of healthcare ethics. Upon this foundation, various ethical theories and approaches will be presented, in light of their relative merits and limitations to guide medical research and practice, given the contemporary world culture of pluralist values and polyglot ethico-legal codes. Key issues, question and problems in contemporary healthcare ethics will then be presented and discussed, including those which arise
from the advancement of frontier domains of science and technology, such as genetics, stem cells, neuroscience, and their applications in psychiatry, regenerative medicine, pain care, and geriatrics. Ultimately, discussion will focus upon those ways that science, technology and ethics influence medicine and inform policy, and how policies and laws can shape and direct the focus and activities of healthcare on national and international scales.

The course is designed to afford students in Liberal Studies better understand the role, value(s), and influence of science and technology as human endeavors for human endeavor. By presenting historicity as a basis for developing current – and future canon – the course is designed to enable students to examine historical fact(s), address those ways that socio-cultural meanings may define and shape the use of human tools and techniques, and in so doing sustain the dual goals of interdisciplinary inquiry and values reflection.

In general, the course poses the following questions:

1. What are key milestone events in the history of medicine and ethics that forged the fusion of healthcare as a profession and ethics as its keel, and which fortified the ethical propriety of its practices?

2. How did events of the 20th century solidify the need and nature of much of contemporary healthcare ethics?

3. What are the relative strengths, limitations, and applications of various ethical systems and theories in healthcare?

4. How do ethics inform and engage healthcare policies, and how do socio-political trends and values influence the scope and conduct of medicine?

5. What ethical issues arise in and from research and applications of “frontier” fields of science and technology (e.g.—genetics, neuroscience) as employed in various domains and disciplines of medicine, and as effected by medicine in society?

6. The Socratic inquiry: “from where have we come, and to where might we be going?”

**Structure of the Course**

This course is primarily based upon didactic lectures provided by the instructor and a set of key readings. The overarching goals are to (1) encourage active discourse, and (2) develop an increasingly sophisticated dialectical approach, as the material moves from historical presentation into more thought-provoking and participatory engagement of current trends in science and technology. This is aimed at fostering a synthetic approach to developing student insight, reflection, and critical thought about cutting-edge advancements in science and technology utilized – or in some cases, misused – in healthcare, and how these applications of research and practice foster ethical, and policy-related issues in 21st century society. Students will be expected to participate in critical discussion of the course material in class and through the use of Blackboard forums.
Learning Goals:

- Develop clear understanding of the nature and practice(s) of interdisciplinary inquiry by actively addressing historicity to appreciate diverse perspectives on fundamental questions of science and technology as human enterprises executed within, and influenced by society. In this way, students foster a discursive and dialectical approach to the engage the strengths, limitations (and possible de-limitations) of disciplinary knowledge and methods of inquiry. This goal is developed by lecture content and supplementary readings that attempt to illustrate a variety of views of each focal topic, and which enable the student to appreciate the influence of philosophy, religions, economics and politics upon the scope and conduct of scientific and technological achievements in contemporary healthcare.

- Practice skills of academic discussion and dialectic argument by developing and presenting an individualized explanatory position based upon support garnered through lecture and reading materials. This goal is supported by: 1) fostering an appreciation for a discursive-to-dialectical style of presenting scholarly material as demonstrated through/by the instructor’s lectures (and lecture style); 2) the development and submission of a short paper that requires the student to select a topic reflective of their own interests (that is relevant to the class focus and material) and allows a forum for the student to address, and summarize, critique and draw salient insights to a particular topic, and 3) building the short paper into a final paper that expands the initial ideas to engage an in-depth discussion, address, analysis and make conclusions and/or speculations about the topic in a formal academic style. Subsequent to grading, students will be offered the option to collaborate with the instructor to revise their papers toward submission to the peer-reviewed literature in consideration of professional publication.

Requirements:

1. **Class Contribution**, including regular participation in classroom discussion, and Blackboard discussion activities. (20%)

2. **One Short Paper** (2000-2500 words, fully referenced) upon a topic of students’ choice that addresses and elucidates a particular ethical aspect, issue, question or problem of 20th century healthcare relative to both its contemporary and future effect upon society, and the influence of social variables upon human health, medicine, science, technology, law and/or politics. The paper topic should be vetted and approved by the professor no later than the fourth week of class. (20%)

3. **Final Paper**: (3500-5000 words fully referenced) that expands upon the short paper to explore in greater detail the topic first addressed in the midterm paper. The paper should be written in an accepted scholarly style (eg.- MLS, Vancouver or Chicago style), and should seek to synthesize and assimilate information gained throughout the course (lectures and readings) together with the
students’ unique individual interests and readings into a working knowledge, analysis, critique and/or review. (60%)

Common Readings:

TBA

Supplemental Readings. Provided in class

A Note on Readings…
Note that readings are supplemental to the lecture material; readings are provided so as to prepare students (in advance) for lecture material, and/or be adjunctive information to the material provided in class lecture(s) and discussion(s). Readings selected from the texts afford information in this tenor.

Honor Code:
MALS and DLS students are responsible for upholding the Georgetown University Honor System and adhering to the academic standards included in the Honor Code Pledge stated below:
In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor; and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.

Disabilities Statement:
If you believe you have a disability, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgetown.edu) for further information. The Center is located in the Leavey Center, Suite 335. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.
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<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Course overview: The need for, and importance of ethics in health care</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The history of healing practices and ethics: Convergent paths, diverse forces</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>The crucible of the 20th century: Faustian bargains, Phoenix rising?</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>From a philosophy of medicine to a perdurable ethics for health care</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>The ethical obligations for – and in – research: A fragile fiduciary</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Healthcare ethics as a process: Systems in practice, informing policy.</td>
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| 7    | Ethical approaches: Strengths, limitations, challenges and de-limitations.  
*MIDTERM PAPER DUE* |
| 8    | Treatments, and/or enhancements: Autonomy, consent and justice |
| 9    | Genomics, genetics and “genethics”: Prediction, prevention, determination? |
| 10   | Stem cell therapeutics: The issues – potential and problematic. |
| 11   | Restorative medicine, life extension: How long, how much, what futility? |
| 12   | Neuroscience, neurotechnology, and neuroethics: Brain, minds, medicine and morality. |
| 13   | Pain, suffering, and pain care: Examining existential gain vs. loss |
| 15   | Healthcare Ethics on the 21st century world-stage:  
Pluralism, Cosmopolitanism, Policy…*Quo vadis?*  
*FINAL PAPER DUE* |